



THE CANDY MAN

John Candy is a most unlikely silver screen star. He commands \$3 million for a screen appearance, he's a hit with tots as well as teens, oldies as well as youngsters, he carries about twice the weight of Tom Hanks but is sitting pretty in the Hanks/Dennis Quaid sex symbol wage bracket.

That often obnoxious sounding Canadian is an actor who, in spite of a string of flops, has box office appeal akin in size to his giant physical frame.

Candy can be seen this month on video in *Uncle Buck*, his funniest and by far his most successful film yet. Though he is one of the kings of contemporary screen comedy, he admits that he never wanted to be a comedian. "I had no idea what I wanted to do," said Candy, reflecting on his formative years in Toronto, Canada, where in 1969, as a chubby 19-year old, he began seeking work in underground theatre. "The group I was studying with was a very serious group and I always thought of myself more as a serious actor. But the group I was studying with thought I was funny. They thought

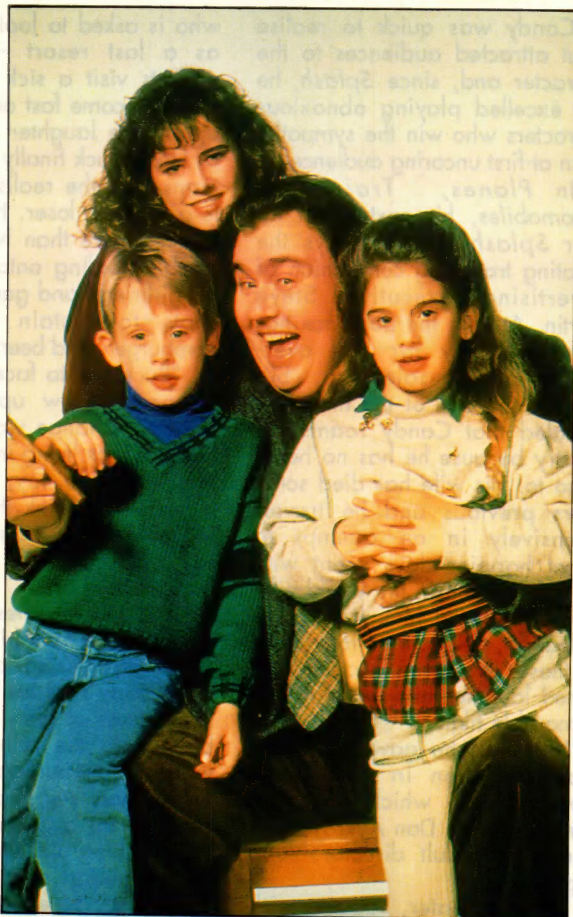
my dramatic work was funny, so I guess I have settled where I belong.

"At the time, there was a large underground theatre movement afoot and I became part of it. I did quite well in it, and I also did advertisements, a couple of films, and then I joined a children's theatre which toured around schools and parks. It was a lot of fun. But it was frustrating too, because there were more people than there was work. I was just waiting for my break."

It came in 1972 when two admirers of his work, American actor Dan Aykroyd and his wife, Valerie, invited him to lunch as part of their plot to trick him into joining their group. "I went to lunch with them while everyone was auditioning for a vacancy. I wasn't going to audition because I didn't feel I was good enough but Dan felt I was. So I'm standing there waiting to meet these two and I hear my name called to audition for the part. I could have shot them, but they pushed me. I walked on stage totally petrified but two weeks later, I was in Chicago on stage working with them.

Candy and Aykroyd became close friends and in 1974, they teamed up with Gilda Radner, Joe Flattery, Eugene Levy (he played a crazy scientist opposite Candy in *Splash*) and Rosemary Radcliffe to launch the Canadian Second City comedy troupe. Their stage show became so popular, it was turned into a TV series two years later. When Aykroyd, Radner and Levy left Canada for New York and fame on *Saturday Night Live*, Candy began to move away from live theatre, first into television and then in feature films.

His feature debut came in Steven Spielberg's *1941*. It flopped badly, but introduced Candy to John Belushi who went on to star with Candy's old pal, Aykroyd, in *The Blues Brothers*. Belushi and Aykroyd persuaded director John Landis to give their rotund mate a small part in the film; he ended up playing the Police Sergeant who pursues Jake and Elroy. It was only a small, rather curious role, which lasted only a few minutes, but it was an integral part of the cult classic, and its many fans who today still hang onto every phrase and scene,



began asking, "Who's the fat guy? He's great".

The turning point in Candy's career came with the pre-*Ghostbusters* teaming of Harold Ramis and Bill Murray in *Stripes*, a low-budget army comedy in which Candy all but stole the show as John Oxenburgh - Ox for short - a memorable character whose dream of becoming "a lean, mean fighting machine" captured the imaginations and hearts of audiences around the world.

But what had happened to Aykroyd two years earlier after *The Blues Brothers* happened to Candy after *Stripes*. It was followed by a mixture of good and bad B-grade comedies, many of which were box office disappointments (*Volunteers*, *Summer Rental*, *Brewster's Millions*, *Spaceballs*, *Armed and Dangerous*). As with Dan, for every good film, there were five flops.

It was in *Splash*, a farcical story about a man who falls in love with a mermaid, that Candy bounced back in the role of the jovial elder brother of Tom Hanks. Again, Candy almost stole the show, winning the hearts of audiences playing a businessman in whom audiences discovered that, beneath the brash exterior, there beat a heart of gold.

Candy was quick to realise what attracted audiences to the character and, since *Splash*, he has excelled playing obnoxious characters who win the sympathy of an at-first uncaring audience.

In *Planes, Trains & Automobiles*, his next major hit after *Splash*, Candy plays the irritating travelling companion of advertising executive Steve Martin. At first, the audience has little sympathy for this oversized, pushy salesman, but towards the end of the film, it is revealed that Candy roams the country because he has no home to go to. His wife has died some years previous and he travels extensively in an attempt to forget happier days spent with the only person in the world who ever understood him. It was the endearing, poignant performances of these two great actors that turned laughter into tears in that memorable film.

In 1988, he gave a similar characterisation in *The Great Outdoors*, in which he again teamed up with Dan Aykroyd and teen-turned-adult director, John Hughes.

A year later, again with Hughes, he gave his best performance yet as Buck Russell, the unemployed, carefree, fun-loving bachelor-uncle of three,

who is asked to look after them - as a last resort - while their parents visit a sick relative. The chuckles come fast and furious but again, the laughter turns to tears as Uncle Buck finally must come to terms with the realisation that he is a bit of a loser. He drinks and smokes more than he should, has trouble holding onto his job and his girlfriend and gambles on long shots to sustain his diet of hamburgers and beer.

"Buck has to face the fact that he never grew up," explained Candy. "Change was difficult for him. He was living in the past so it was easier to say, 'It'll be right tomorrow'. I think there are a lot of people like Uncle Buck. Sad to say, I think there is a lot of Uncle Buck in all of us."

It is in comedies like *Planes, Trains & Automobiles* and *Uncle Buck* with their social commentary that Candy sees his future. "I think the success of films like this might be due to the references to old values: communication is good, high school sex is bad. It's about families, for a generation which is still catching up. We're out of the yuppie period now, looking back, analysing, reflecting on all that terrible furniture."

"I want to make sure my comedy mix is biting and memorable. I have no time for those gang-like comedies," he said, referring to the *Police Academy* films and their like. "Comedy's got to be insightful and hit and care. It's got to have something to say. I've done slapstick and farcical comedy and it doesn't have much to say in terms of what's going on in society. They are great, and I've done those roles too, but I find it much more rewarding if they have something concrete to say. That doesn't mean it has to get heavy, but there has to be an underlying benefit that people will hear, laugh at, and then hopefully, have something to take home to think about."

To be able to make people laugh is an avenue I'd like to pursue more. That is a truer form of comedy for me. It's more comfortable for me to have something to say, but having said that, when you're a working actor you have to take what you can when you're starting out."

Luckily for him and us, he can pick and choose his movies a bit more these days.

